Letter from Simon Newcomb to Alexander Graham Bell, May 20, 1884

Nautical Almanac Office, Navy Department Washington D.C. May 20th. 1884. Dear Professor Bell;

Although the question you ask seems to admit of a satisfactory answer, I notice a singular defect in the statistical table. It contains not a single case of a deaf mute being reported as having married a hearing person. If this is an accidental omission in making the copy for you, it ought to be corrected, if there is really no such record the case is very singular. It would look as if the parties were ashamed to state that they had married hearing persons, or the recorders had rejected all such cases.

The main question which you ask can, I think, be answered by the theory of probabilities. Your table, if I understand it correctly, shows that out of 089 629 persons in the institution who married deaf-mutes of whom 329 were males and 300 females, a little less than one half were married congenital deaf mutes. Now I see no reason for supposing that the persons whom they married would be divided in any essentially different proportion between the two classes. It is true that could we learn from the census tables how the entire deaf of the country of marraigable ages, say between the ages of 20 and 30, are divided between the two classes, our conclusions might be modified. If , for example , it should be found that of the total number of deaf alluded to only one third were congenital cases, we might be allowed to suppose that the marriages reported were divided according to this ratio, rather than according to the approximate ratio of equality found in the asylum. But we should consider that this surplus of non-congenital deaf would indicate a class who associate principally with hearing persons and who would therefore be less likely to marry deaf mutes than others would. I think therefore that under the circumstances we should regard the ratio given by statistics of the institution as the most

probable one. Of course the reason for this is strengthened if , as you intimate , a large proportion of the statistics may be mutual. Allowing for a probable slight tendency of the two classes congenital and non-congenital to choose each other, I think the most probable conclusion would be this: of the congenital deaf one half married congenital and one half non-congenital deaf.

Of the non-congenital three sevenths married congenital deaf and four sevenths non-congenital deaf.

And I consider these results sufficiently probable to form the basis of conclusions in cases where slight changes in the numbers would not change the general result.

If you wish your table returned please inform me.

Yours very truly, S. Newcomb Professor A.G.Bell, 1500 R.I. Ave. N.W. Washington, D.C.